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*The Reasonableness and Pleasure of
the Christian Life.*

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S E R M O N

Preached in

St. Thomas's, Southwark,

JANUARY 1, 1754.

For the BENEFIT of the

CHARITY-SCHOOL

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By *WILLIAM PRIOR.*

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M A T. xi. 30.

For my Yoke is easy, and my Burden is light.



OTHING is more unfriendly to mankind than to picture religion in a form, gloomy and terrifying. Nothing is a more injurious calumny against the gospel, than to represent its precepts, as rigorous impositions and unnecessary restraints. This is false representation. True religion is the perfection of human nature, and the foundation of uniform, exalted pleasure; of public order and private happiness. Christianity is an excellent institution, and most useful, having *the promise of the life, that now is, and of that which is to come*^a. It is the voice of reason; it is also the language of scripture—*the ways of wisdom are ways of pleasantness*^b; in keeping the divine commands *there is great reward*^c; and our ble-

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^a 1 Tim. iv. 8.

^b Prov. iii. 17.

^c Psal. xix. 11.

fed Saviour assurēth us, that his *yoke is easy* and that his *burden is light*.

From these words my design is, to plead the cause of religion,—to plead it with those, who allege the severity of its rules, as an excuse for their neglect of them, and from a misapprehension of the difficulties of religion decline the *reasonable service*.

In treating the subject I propose,

First, to make one or two brief remarks in order to clear the sense of this passage; and to limit the bounds of the truth which it contains.

Secondly, to represent the reasonableness, the ease and pleasure of the christian life.

These things considered, there will be room for some useful inferences, not unsuitable to the occasion of our present assembling.

First, I am to make one or two remarks, in order to clear the sense of this passage and to limit the bounds of the truth, which it contains. The needful remarks are these— The assertion in the text supposeth, that persons are in some degree inured to the practice of religion, and have a virtuous disposition of mind. To those, who have long engaged in a wicked life, the duties of religion are at first irksome and grievous, because

because they oppose strong prejudices and confirmed habits of vice: but when evil habits are removed, and good ones are acquired, religion is easy, and its duties become delightful.—Again; the natural advantages resulting from the practice of piety and virtue may be obstructed in great measure by the oppressions of power, by the prevalence of a melancholy temper, or by wrong sentiments of religion: but where there are no violent persecutions; where there is nothing in the constitution inclining to gloom and despondency; where there is nothing in men's schemes of religion that is morose and severe; where religion is rightly understood and uniformly practised, the genuine fruits are inward composure and sublime satisfaction. This being premised, we proceed,

Secondly, to represent the reasonableness, ease and pleasure of the christian life, or to shew under a few propositions, that the religion of Jesus is an *easy yoke* and a *light burden*.—We would observe

In the first place, that the religion of Jesus is easier than the religion contained in the law of *Moses*. The Jews were a people of a low genius; so fond of pageantry, and so prone to superstition, that had they not been indulged with a ceremonious religion of their own, they would have renounced the worship of the true God altogether, and

have fallen in with the stupid idolatry of the neighbouring nations. From a regard to their weakness, a pompous service, and a long train of innocent ceremonies were wisely enjoined by the Mosaic law. Besides the moral precepts, the ritual observances under that dispensation were very numerous; some of them very expensive, and others very grievous. All this together rendered that service so burdensome, that an apostle of Christ scruples not, to call it, a *yoke, which neither they nor their fathers were able to bear*^d.

Is it thus with the christian institution? Quite otherwise. This hath *abolished the law of commandments, contained in ordinances*^e; and in its stead requires of us a rational service, a worship in *spirit and in truth*; such as is worthy of the majesty of God to accept, and of the nature of man to pay. One of its important and essential branches is natural religion—restored, when the knowledge of it was in a manner erased from the minds of men by vice and wild enthusiasm—reinforced by additional motives and new discoveries. Its positive rites are few, of plain, easy significance, manifestly adapted to establish a sense of moral obligations. The gospel placeth religion, not in abstruse speculation and metaphysical subtleties; not in outward shew and tedious ceremony; not in

^d Acts xv. 10.

^e Ephes. ii. 15.

in superstitious austerities and enthusiastic vision ; but in purity of heart and holiness of life. The sum of our duty, in the opinion of our divine master, consisteth in the *love of God and of our neighbour*^f ; according to *St. Paul*, in *denying ungodliness and worldly lusts* ; and in *living soberly, righteously and godly in the present world*^g ; according to *St. James*, in *visiting the fatherless and widows in their affliction*, and in *keeping ourselves unspotted from the world*^h.—This is the constant strain and tenor of the gospel. This it inculcates most earnestly, and on this it lays the greatest stress.

But is the christian scheme only a republication of the law of nature, or merely a refined system of morality ? Certainly, something more. It is an act of grace, a stupendous plan of providence, designed for the recovery of mankind from a state of degradation and ruin to the favour of God and to the hopes of an happy immortality through a mediator. Under this dispensation true religion expresseth itself in *a repentance towards God*, and in *faith in the Lord Jesus Christ*, as the person appointed by the supreme authority of heaven and earth to reconcile apostate men to their offended Maker ; as a sacrifice for sin ; our vital Head and our governing Lord.—This is religion

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^f Matt. xxii. 37, &c. ^g Tit. ii. 12. ^h James i. 27.

as we are christians. And what hardship, what exaction is there in all this? It will help to illustrate and enforce this truth, if we consider,

Secondly, that consequently the practice of religion is much easier than the servitude of sin. Our rational powers, it will be acknowledged, are impaired, and the soul is much enfeebled by sin: the animal passions are strong and apt to oppose the dictates of reason: objects of sense make powerful impressions upon the mind. We are, in every situation, surrounded with many temptations and snares. In such a disordered state of things, to maintain a course of strict piety and uncorrupted virtue is a work of great difficulty. However, as restraints from vice and incitements to virtue, there are closely woven into our make many tender propensions and generous instincts. The gracious author of nature has planted in the human mind a quick sense of good and evil; a faculty which strongly dictates right and wrong. And though by the strength of appetite and warmth of passion men are often hurried into immoral practices; yet in the beginning, especially where there has been the advantage of a good education, it is usually with great reluctance and opposition of mind. What inward struggles precede, and what bitter pangs attend their sinful excesses! what guilty blushes and uneasy fears!

fears! What startling prospects and pale reviews! *Terrors are upon them, and a fire not blown consumeth them*ⁱ. To make a *mock of sin*, and to commit iniquity without remorse, is an attainment, that requires length of time, and much painful labour; — more painful labour than is requisite to attain that habitual goodness, which is the glory of the man, the ornament of the christian, his preparation for heaven, and the chief spring of his happiness there. The soul can no more be reconciled to flagrant acts of wickedness, than the body to excess, but by passing through many painful fits and uneasy qualms.

The mouth of conscience may indeed be stopped for a while by false principles: its secret whispers may be drowned by the noise of company, and stifled by the entertainments of sense: but so deeply rooted is this principle of conscience in human nature, so clear and strong its voice, that all the sinners arts will be unable to lull it into a lasting security. When the hour of calamity comes upon the sinner; when sickness seizeth, and death approaches, conscience constrains him to attend to her accusations, and will not suffer the temples of his head to take any rest. *There is no peace to the wicked.* The foundations of peace are subverted, and they

ⁱ Job xx. 25, 26;

they are at utter enmity with their reason, with their conscience, and with their God.

Not so in the case of true religion. Conscience is on her side : reason pleads for her, and interest joins in the recommendation.

When religion, pure and genuine, forms the temper, and governs the life, conscience applauds, and there is inward peace. The soul is in its right state. There is an order and regularity in the faculties, as well as in the actions. Conscious of its own integrity, and secure of the divine approbation, it enjoys a calmness, not to be described. But why do I call this happy frame, calmness only ? It is far beyond mere calmness. There may be a calmness in the air, though the day be overcast with thick mists and clouds. The pious, virtuous mind is like a serene day, enlightened and enlivened with the brightest sun-shine. Though all without may be clouds and darkness ; there is light in the heart of the good man. *He is satisfied from himself ; and is filled with peace and joy in believing.* In the concluding scene all is peaceful and serene. The immortal part quits its tenement of clay with the well-grounded hope of ascending to happiness and glory. Besides,

The gospel enjoins no duty but what is fit and reasonable. It calls upon all its professors to practise reverence, submission, and gratitude to God ; justice, truth, and universal

versal benevolence towards men ; and to maintain the government of their own minds. And what has any one to object against this ? From the least of Christ's commandments to the greatest of them, there is not one, which impartial reason can find fault with. *His law is perfect : his precepts are true, and righteous altogether.* Not even those excepted, which require us to *love our enemies, to deny ourselves, and to take up our cross.* To forgive an injury is more generous and manly than to revenge it ; to control licentious appetite, than to indulge it : To suffer poverty, reproach, and even death itself, in the sacred cause of truth and integrity, is much wiser and better, than, by base compliances, to make *shipwreck of faith and a good conscience.* Thus in a storm at sea, or in a conflagration a-shore, a man with pleasure abandons his lumber to secure his jewels. Piety and virtue are the wisest and most reasonable things in the world ; vice and wickedness are most irrational and absurd. To this we would add,

The all-wise Author of our being hath so framed our natures, and placed us in such relations, that there is nothing vicious but what is injurious, nothing virtuous but what is advantageous to our present interest, with respect both to body and mind. Meekness and humility, patience and universal charity, are graces, which give a joy, *unknown to*

transgressors. The divine virtues of truth and equity are the only bands of friendship, and support of society. Sobriety and temperance are the best preservatives of health and strength; whereas sin and debauch impair the body, consume the substance, reduce to poverty, and are the direct path to an immature and untimely death. Now this is the chief excellence of all laws, and what will ever keep them from being burdensom, when they enjoin nothing unbecoming, nothing injurious. But,

Thirdly, to render our duty easy, we have the example of Christ, as well as his commands. The great masters of morality among the heathens gave very good rules for the regulation of men's manners: but against all their harangues there lay this exception: They wanted either the honesty or the courage to try their own arguments upon themselves. It was a strong presumption, that the yoke of the *Scribes* and *Pharisees* was grievous; when they laid *heavy burthens upon men's shoulders*, which they themselves refused to *touch with one of their fingers*^k. Not thus our great Lawgiver, Christ Jesus. His behaviour was in all respects conformable to his doctrine. His devotion towards God, how sublime and ardent! His benevolence towards men, how generous and diffusive! He was in his life

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an exact pattern of innocence: for he *did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth*¹. In his death, of patience; for he *was brought, as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb; so he opened not his mouth*^m. The most shining characters amongst mere men are shaded and blemished by many imperfections: but in the Son of God, incarnate, is exhibited to us the brightest and fairest resemblance of the Father, that earth or heaven ever beheld, — an example in itself finished, and most perfect; — an example, peculiarly persuasive, calculated to inspire resolution, and to animate to divine improvement: For it is the example of the *author and finisher of our faith*; of our great friend and benefactor; of him, who *loved us, and gave himself for us*. Our profession and character, as christians, oblige us to make this example the model of our own lives. Every motive of decency, gratitude and interest constrain us *so to walk, even as he walked*. — We would observe,

In the fourth place, that our duty is easy; because God, who *knoweth our frame*, is ever ready to assist. Of this assistance many of the heathen Sages had some notions, guided merely by nature's light. But what they looked upon only as probable, the gospel clearly and strongly asserts. We there hear the Apostle exhorting, *Let us come boldly to*

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the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in the time of needⁿ. We there hear our Lord himself arguing in this convincing manner: — *If ye being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give the holy spirit to them that ask him^o.*

Certain it is, many things in scripture, relating to the operations of the Spirit of God upon the mind, have a reference to those extraordinary gifts, which were peculiar to the Apostolic age. But to confine the office of the Spirit to the first dispensation of the gospel, and to his extraordinary work at that time, seems to us to rob christianity of its glory, and its professors of some of their noblest supports and encouragements.

The scripture-doctrine of divine influences is not, as a late writer against revelation insinuates, a doctrine of fate and of licentiousness. We do not assert, that the agency of the spirit is irresistible, and lays a necessitating bias on all the faculties and affections. Were this the case, precepts and prohibitions, promises and threatenings, would signify nothing: and duty and obligation would be words without any meaning. The spirit assisteth in a way agreeable to the frame of human nature, not controlling the free use of reason, but by the help of the under-

understanding, influencing the will, and moderating the affections. But though the mode of his operations we may not be able to explain, the scriptures warrant us to assert, that, when men are renewed and prepared for heaven, it is *through sanctification of the spirit, and belief of the truth*^P. How enlivening the thought! How encouraging the motive! We are not left to struggle alone with the difficulties, which attend the practice of virtue in the present imperfect state. The merciful Father of our spirits is ever near to help our infirmities, to enlighten the understanding, to strengthen good resolutions, and, in concurrence with our own endeavours, to make us conquerors over all opposition. *Faithful is he to his promises, and will not suffer the sincere and well-disposed to be tempted above what they are able to bear*^q. What can be desired more than this? To promote the virtue and happiness of his moral offspring, the supreme Parent hath done all that is consistent with the holiness of his nature, and the agency of man. If then we are not virtuous and happy, we are utterly inexcusable.

Further: The great doctrine of the gospel, concerning the propitious mercy of God to all sincere penitents through Christ Jesus, contributes much to the ease and pleasure of a religious life. — Let it be granted, that

^P 2 Thef. ii. 13.

^q 1 Cor. x. 13.

that the hope of pardon is essential to the religion of fallen creatures ; and one of its first principles ; yet considering the doubts and suspicions, which are apt to rise in the mind, conscious of guilt, it is undoubtedly, a great, an inestimable favour, to be relieved in this respect by a messenger from God himself. This is our happiness. We are not left to depend upon uncertain hopes, or consequential reasonings, which the bulk of mankind are very little used to ; but we are assured, that, upon our repentance, we shall, *through the mediation of Christ*, receive the *full remission of past sins*, and be restored to the same state of favour with our Maker, as if we had never transgressed his laws. Here the gospel triumphs. With these assurances it abounds. Upon this head the declarations of our Savior and his Apostles are so express and full, that every one who believes them, and knows himself to be a true penitent, must banish every doubt, and fear, and *rejoice with joy unspeakable*. *Come unto me, all ye that labour, and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*. *All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men*^t. Be it known to you, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the *forgiveness of sins* : *And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses*^t. The blood

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of Jesus cleanseth from all sin^u.—What grace and favour is this! who can repeat the wondrous truth too often! who can dwell on the transporting theme too long! Now our way is plain before us, and the burden we are to bear is made easy. No sins are unpardonable, if repented of and forsaken.

Consider this all you, if we may suppose any of that character in this assembly, who have never yet minded religion, but have pursued a course of vice and sensuality all your lives long. Though your conduct has been base to the last degree, your case is not desperate. Far from it. The God whom you have so highly offended commiserates your errors, is ever ready to extend his pardoning mercy to his most degenerate creatures upon their repentance and reformation, and *is in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto penitent sinners their trespasses^v.* *Let the wicked therefore forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, who will so liberally extend his mercy to him, and to our God, who will thus abundantly pardon^x.*

In the last place, the christian life is easy and delightful; because it leads to the perfect, eternal life of heaven. That there are from the light of nature strong presumptions of a future state cannot be denied. The present

present existence does not look like an entire scene; but rather like the infancy of human nature, which is capable of rising to much greater maturity: but whatever solid foundation the doctrine of a future state may have in nature and reason; certain it is, that through the habitual neglect of reflection and the force of irregular passions, this doctrine was, before the coming of Christ, very much disfigured, and in great measure lost among men.

In the heathen world, a future state of rewards was a matter of mere speculation and uncertainty, sometimes hoped for, sometimes doubted of, and at other times absolutely denied. The law of *Moses*, though of divine original, is enforced chiefly by promises of temporal blessings; and even in the writings of the prophets a future immortality is very sparingly mentioned, and obscurely represented. But the doctrine of our Savior hath *brought life and immortality to full light*. In the gospel we have a distinct account of another world, attended with many engaging circumstances; about which the decisions of reason were dark and confused. We have the testimony of the author of our religion, who was raised from the dead, and afterwards, in the presence of his disciples, ascended into heaven. In the new Testament it is expressly declared, that good men, *when absent from the body are present*

present with the Lord ^y. Here we are assured of the resurrection of the body, of a glorious form, clothed with immortal vigour, suited to the active nature of the animating spirit, and assisting its most enlarged operations, and incessant progress towards perfection. Here we are assured, that *the righteous shall go into life eternal* ^z; that they shall enter into the heavenly kingdom, where no ignorance shall cloud the understanding, and no vice disturb the will;—where nothing but love shall possess the soul, and nothing but gratitude employ the tongue;—where they shall be united to an *innumerable company of angels*, and to the *general assembly and church of the first-born* ^a;—where they shall see the exalted Redeemer at the right hand of the Father, and *sit down with him in his throne*;—where they shall be admitted into the immediate presence of the supreme fountain of life and blessedness, and, beholding his face, be *changed into the same image from glory to glory*.—Here language—here imagination, fails me—*Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have it entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him*.—What is the *Elysium* of the heathen, compared with the heaven of the christian? The hope, the prospect of this is sufficient to reconcile us to all difficulties in

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the way, and to sweeten all our labours; to alleviate every grief, and to silence every murmur.

Thus we have shewn that the religion instituted by Christ Jesus is an *easy yoke* and a *light burden*.

But why, says the dissolute libertine in the gaiety of his heart, any yoke at all? God has made nothing in vain. The appetites he has planted in the human frame are to be gratified. To deny or to restrain them is ignominious bondage: but to give full scope to every desire and passion of the heart without check or controll is true, manly freedom.

In opposition to this loose and careless way of talking, let it be considered—the liberty of a rational creature doth not consist in an entire exemption from all rule; but in following the dictates of reason, as the governing principle, and in keeping the various passions in due subordination. To follow the regular movement of those affections, which the great creator for wise and useful purposes hath implanted within us is our duty: but as our natural desires in this state of trial are apt to be irregular, we are bound to restrain their excesses, and not to indulge them, but in a strict subserviency to the integrity and peace of our minds, and to the order and happiness of the world. They who allow to sense and brutal appetite the supreme command may *promise themselves liberty*;

liberty; but all the while they are the *servants of corruption*. To be vicious is to be enslaved. We look with pity upon such as are chained down to gallies, or confined to dark prisons and loathsome dungeons: but much more abject and vile is the slavery of the sinner. No slavery of the body is equal to the bondage of the mind: no chains press so closely, or gall so cruelly, as the fetters of sin, which corrode the very substance of the soul and fret every faculty.

It must be confessed, some profligates there are, who have so hardened themselves by custom, as to be *past feeling*; and, because insensible of their bondage, they boast of this their insensibility, as a mark of their native freedom, and of their happiness. Vain men! with equal propriety might they extol the peculiar happiness of an apoplexy, and the profound tranquillity of a lethargy.

We now come to mention some useful reflexions, which will naturally rise upon the subject.

First, we learn hence the peculiar excellency and perfection of the christian religion. This hath cleared away idolatry and superstition, and brought immortal life to light, when wrapt up in almost impenetrable darkness. This hath set the great truths of religion in a clear and strong view, and hath proposed new and powerful motives

tives to influence our minds and to determine our conduct. Nothing is enjoined to be believed, but what is worthy of God; nothing to be practised, but what is friendly to man. Some important branches of this dispensation reason indeed could not discover, nor can reason justly arraign. With respect to other branches, it should be always remembered; *there is a great deal of difference between finding out truth ourselves, and discerning the evidence of it, when found.* All the doctrines of the gospel are rational and consistent: all its precepts are most wise, just and good. The gospel contains nothing grievous to an ingenuous mind: it debars us from nothing, but doing harm to ourselves or to our fellow-creatures; and permits us to range any where, but in the paths of danger and destruction. It only requires us to act up to the dignity of the rational nature, and to prefer to the vanishing pleasures of sin the smiles of a reconciled God and *an eternal weight of glory.* And is this rigorous exaction, a heavy burden, not to be endured? Unworthy thought! base surmise!

Surely no man, who is a real friend to the cause of virtue and to the interest of mankind, can ever be an enemy to christianity, if he truly understands it, and reflects upon its most wise and useful tendency. It conducteth us to our journey's end by the plainest and securest path that can be, where *the steps are not straitened, and where he that runneth,*

runneth, stumbleth not^b. Let us, who live under this last and most gracious dispensation of God to mankind, *count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, our Lord*; and not suffer ourselves, by the slight cavils of unbelievers, to be *moved away from the hope of the gospel*. Let us shew that we believe the superior excellency of the gospel, by conforming to the rules of it. Let us shew, that we are christians indeed and in truth, not by endless disputes about trifles, and the transports of a blind zeal; but by practising that universal, that exalted goodness, our holy religion recommends and by abounding in those *fruits of righteousness, which are through Christ to the praise and glory of God*.

Secondly, this subject leads us to condemn those, who make christianity burdensome by the addition of rituals of men's devising. The simplicity of the christian doctrine is its greatest glory. By mixing things of a foreign nature with it, its native beauty is defaced, and its excellent tendency much weakened. Yet what more common than to substitute the doctrines and inventions of men in the place of the doctrines and institutions of Christ!

The most guilty in this kind are the governors of the church of Rome. They have hid pure, original christianity under a thick veil of ceremonies, the filliest and most

^b Prov. iv. 12.

most wretched that ever disgraced humanity, and have turned this divine religion into mere mummery and raree-show. The superstitious rites of that corrupted church are multiplied almost beyond number, and have rendered what they call christianity more burdensome than even the jewish religion.

It becomes us to have a due sense of the blessings we enjoy by being instructed in the principles of the protestant religion, whereby we are delivered from the most deplorable corruption, and the most cruel bondage. From a just consideration of these blessings, let us be zealous to secure them to ourselves, and to make others partakers of them.—Let us never presume to substitute a human ordinance in the place of one, that is divine; nor mingle our own weaknesses with the plain doctrine of Christ: but let us take the christian religion, as it is delivered to us by its glorious author; and with regard to positive duties strictly adhere to the primitive model against all arbitrary encroachments *.

Thirdly,

* The celebrated historian of the council of Trent, after enumerating the decisions of that synod concerning justification, which they had refined upon with great labour, and cast entirely into the scholastic mould, adds this severe reflection: “ Of all these curious determinations, the greatest share of the merit incontestably belongs to Aristotle, who had in his Analytics accurately distinguished the various kinds of causes; which, if that famous heathen philosopher had not settled, we christians, alas! had, at this day, remained

Thirdly, we may from what has been said clearly see, how groundless all those prejudices are, which some conceive against religion; as if it was a peevish, morose scheme, burthensome to human nature, and inconsistent with the true enjoyment of life. Such sentiments are apt especially to prevail in the heat of youth, when the spirits are brisk and lively, and the passions warm and impetuous.—But this is all mistake; and a mistake of the most dangerous tendency. The truth is, there is no pleasure like that of a good conscience; no real peace, but what results from the practice of virtue. This enables the mind, and can alone support it under all the various unequal scenes of the present state. This lays the foundation of an easy, comfortable life; of a serene, peaceful death, and of eternal joy and blessedness hereafter. Whereas vice is ruinous to all our most valuable interests. This spoils the native beauty and subverts the order of the soul. This renders us the scorn of man, the rejected of God, and without timely repentance will rob us of a happy eternity. Religion is the health, the liberty, and happiness of the soul; sin is the disease, the servitude and destruction of it.

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“ mained ignorant of many important articles of faith.”—A bitter sarcasm indeed, but just: and it were to be wished, that this council had been the *only one* to which it could have been with propriety applied.—

Fra. Paol. L. 2. Ses. 6.

If I thought this not sufficient to convince you, I would lead you into the chamber of the habitual rioter and leud debauchee, worn out in the cause of iniquity ; *his bones full of the sins of his youth*, and from his own Mouth, as he lies on his expiring bed, oppressed with guilt and remorse, you should learn, that *the way of transgressors is hard*, and that however sweet sin may be in the commission, *it stings like a serpent, and bites like an adder*. Whatever the gay licentious may imagine, that to throw off all thoughts of religion, and by a course of intemperance to stifle the dictates of conscience is a state of ease and pleasure, it will after all be found ineffectual. When outward objects lose their power to charm, and their thoughts are called inward, they are usually rouzed out of their lethargy, and entertained with none but dark and gloomy prospects. It must be owned, it sometimes happens, that men, who have led very wicked lives, have gone out of the world, as they lived in it, defying conscience and deriding a future judgment, as an idle fiction : but these instances are very rare, and only prove, that there are monsters in the moral, as well as in the natural world.

It will be said, that the sons of vice and riot have pleasure in sensual indulgences. Allowed : but it is altogether of the lower kind, empty, fleeting and transient : *Like the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the mirth*

mirth of the wicked. It makes a noise and a blaze for the present; but soon vanishes away into smoke and vapour. On the other hand the pleasure of religion is solid and lasting; which will attend us through all, even the last stages of life. When we have outlived the levity of youth, and have lost our relish for the gay entertainments of sense; when old age steals upon us, and stoops us towards the grave; this will cleave fast to us, and give us relief. It will be so far from ending at death, that then it commences perfect, and continually improves with new additions.

Let the younger part of this audience give a favourable attention to these things. The world you are entering upon lies in wait with variety of temptations. Unkind sentiments of religion will soon be suggested to you, and manifold snares spread in your way. But be not deceived by the artifices of seducers, nor be discouraged by any ill reports, that may be brought against religion. Be determined for a life of sobriety and virtue in your younger years. *Taste and see* how good the Lord is, and you will never repent of the experiment. Do but seriously set yourselves to serve God, if any of you have never yet done it, and you will soon confess, that religion is quite another thing than it appeared to you before you became acquainted with her. Instead of that forbidding aspect, in which you heretofore painted her to yourselves, with clouds and frowns upon her

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brow, you will discover nothing in her, but what is most lovely and charming. You will confess that *the merchandise of wisdom is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold.* You will find such pleasures belonging to purity and goodness, as have no sorrows with them; as leave no stain upon the name, no guilt upon the soul; pleasures, far exceeding theirs, who *chant to the sound of the viol, and who are joyful in the strength of new wine;* pleasures as much superior to the false, polluted joys of sensuality, as the soul is to the body, and the life of an angel to that of a brute. As you advance in holiness, you will improve in the consolations of the Holy Ghost; reap comfort in this world, and glory in the next.

We have seen the close of one year more, and are entered upon another. The grand clock of time has struck another hour. The span of life shortens continually. Our minutes are all on the wing, hastening to be gone. Many of us in the last year have carried out our dearest relatives to their funerals. We have, all of us, seen several of our friends laid up in their graves. It is more than probable that some in this assembly will be removed into another world, before the next year commenceth. Those who are now vigorous in health and blooming in youth have no more assurance of outliving this year than those, whose cheeks are furrowed with age; and

and whose strength is wasted by a fickle constitution. Let youth learn the proper lesson from hence, not to be over-confident, but modest and considerate—not to be libertine; but to act with prudence and virtue—while engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, not to deprive themselves of the substantial pleasures of virtue; not to forget that they are the mortal creatures and subjects of the eternal God and accountable to his supreme tribunal. Then whatever year they are called out of this world, they will go off the stage with honour, with the applause of men, and with the approbation of God himself.

We would entreat those who have not lost their natural modesty; who yet blush at vice, to guard against the beginnings of it; without delay to retrieve a false step; to check a disorderly passion, before it gathers strength by indulgence and grows into a habit.

Happy they, who in any part of life become sensible of their errors, and with painful self-correction tread back the wrong steps they have taken: but happiest of men are they, who from the earliest stage of moral life have with cheerful freedom trod in the ways of virtue, and have known no other path; who by an even course of right conduct from the first have at once avoided the miseries of sin, the sorrows of repentance, and the difficulties of virtue; who not only

can think of their present state with compo-
sure; but reflect upon their past behaviour
with conscious approbation; and look for-
ward with unmixed joy to that important
future hour, when they shall appear before
God, and humbly offer to him a whole life,
spent in his service.

Once more: From this subject we learn
the importance of a religious education. —
The infant mind is like a fertile field, which,
if by due cultivation it be not made to pro-
duce good fruit, will certainly spring up in
tares and thistles. It therefore greatly con-
cerns all those, under whose care children
are placed, in the very dawn of reason to
instil into them good principles; to form
them to just notions of things; to train
them up with a strict regard to piety and
virtue; not by rough management to break
the sprightliness of their spirits; but by a
winning affability to engage them to the love
and cheerful practice of their duty. No op-
portunity should be lost of convincing them,
how reasonable and beneficial it is to do
well; how unreasonable and mischievous to
do ill. They should hear continually, that
the way of virtue and goodness is the
high road to happiness; and that a vicious
course of life, however it may delude for a
while, will infallibly end in ruin and de-
struction. They should be taught to rever-
ence their Creator, their Saviour, their con-
sciences. To set these things before them
in

in a strong light, and to fix them deep in their minds, should be the constant aim of all parents and instructors; as these are the most important truths they can teach, or their tender charge can learn. For if children are not taught to fear God, they will not fear man. If they do not love and reverence their Maker, they will not love and reverence their best friends. Where there is no sense of religion, all other bonds and ties signify nothing. A religious education is the strongest of all human securities; and the surest foundation that can be laid for virtue and happiness, and no less in low than in high life.

But in humble life some parents have no inclination; some have no time, and many want sufficient substance to educate their children in a proper manner. And when no care is taken in their education; when their minds are left unfurnished and naked, altogether, as their bodies, what must be the general consequence, it is too easy to conceive. Habits of idleness and vice are acquired, and they soon become expert in all the arts of villainy. What instance of charity can there be, more glorious in itself, or more beneficial to the public, than by fixing such poor children in schools of labour, as well as of moral and religious instruction, to snatch them out of the jaws of destruction; and to form those, who otherwise might have been lost to God, to themselves, and

to

to the community, into sober citizens, useful subjects, and good christians !

It is such an exercise of charity, for which I am called this day to be an advocate. You will permit me to report to you,

The present State of the School.

THE foundation of it was laid in the year 1687, in the reign of king *James* the Second, when a school was set up by one *Poulton*, a Jesuit; and public notice was given, that he would instruct the children of the poor gratis: Upon which Mr. *Arthur Shallet*, Mr. *Samuel Warburton*, and Mr. *Ferdinando Holland*, laid the foundation of this school, to avoid the dangerous consequences of a *popish* school, and provide for the instruction of the children of the poor in the protestant way.

The number of scholars at first was 40, afterwards increased to 50, and now to 180; they are taught to read, write, and cypher, and are instructed in the principles of our common christianity; and thereby qualified for the service of God and man. It may be said to be the first school the protestant *Dissenters* were concerned in; here objects are received without distinction of parties, the common good being intended.

It is situated in one of the poorest parts of this city, and the children of the poorest sort of watermen, fishermen, and others, are here

here taught without any expence to their parents, and are furnished with bibles, testaments, catechisms, and writing and cyphering books.

The charges have been defrayed by the gifts and subscriptions of private persons; with an annual collection in this place on this day, together with the kind remembrance of the said school by some in their last wills.

From this account you see the original, and progress of this school; — the first in its kind amongst you; founded on principles, generous and catholic, party and faction having no concern here; — situated, where such a school is most needed; the learning taught in it, such as is suited to the circumstances of the children, to make them good christians, and useful members of society in the lower stations of life.

This is the charity I would recommend to your regard, if any further recommendation is requisite in behalf of those, whose modest looks, whose unaffected plainness, and regular behaviour do so engagingly plead for them, with all the force of the most moving eloquence. I am not imploring your compassion for old and infirm persons, whose younger years were spent in vanity and sin. I ask not your charity for those, who have exhausted their substance in luxury and riot; and are now, by their folly, reduced to poverty

verty and want; though some degrees of tenderneſs are due to ſuch unhappy persons. But thoſe for whom I now ſupplicate are poor children. If then childhood and youth, exposed to all the ſad attendants upon want and diſtress, can move your compassion, the objects are before you, which have a ſtrong claim to it. Caſt your pitying eye upon them. Let your kind, beneſicent hands help forward the happiness of thoſe, who, with a humility becoming their low eſtate, riſe up to crave your relief, and to implore bleſſings from heaven on their benefactors. The reaſon of the duty is clear and ſtrong: The moṭives to it are many and powerful. — By your contributions on this occaſion, you will express a christian concern for the ſouls, as well as bodies of theſe children; and at the ſame time a generous regard to the community, whereof you are members. Our Savior, who *went about doing good*, has left us an example in this reſpect, that we ſhould *follow his ſteps*. His compassion and benevolence to little children is obſerved by the Evangelists, and with ſuch circumſtances as ſhew that he laid a great ſtress upon this kind of charity. When *his diſciples rebuked thoſe, who brought young children to him, he was diſpleased, and ſaid unto them, Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbide them not, for of ſuch is the kingdom of heaven. He took them up in his arms, and bleſſed them*.

—With

¶ Mark x. 13, 14, 15.

—With such sacrifices God is well-pleased^a :— Such labours of love he will not forget^e; they who do them shall not lose their reward. As for these little ones, such is the weakness of their age, such the meanness of their condition, that from them you cannot expect any recompence for your charity: But they have a *Father in heaven*, who will abundantly recompense you at the resurrection of the just^f. *Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy*^g. — So forcible are these motives, taken all together, that, if you have the hearts of christians, you will not, you cannot, resist them.

But I forbear pressing you any farther. I would not extort your charity, for fear of robbing you of the benefit of it. I would not aim at raising an undue warmth of affection; to your coolest reason the address is made. My earnest desire is, that you may approve yourselves to God, and to your own consciences in what you communicate. Act upon deliberate conviction. Act from right principles, from the sublime principles of the gospel: *Let every one give, as he is disposed in his own mind: but not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loveth a cheerful giver*^h.

I have but a few things more to say: God grant they may make a due impression on my own mind, and on your's. The fa-

F fashion

^a Heb. xiii. 16.

^e vi. 10,

^f Luke xiv. 14.

^g Matth. v. 7.

^h 2 Cor. ix. 7.

shion of this world passeth away. A few more years, a few more months and days ; and we, who are now acting our several parts on the busy scene of life, must go off the stage, and be laid low in the dust. Neglected opportunities will never return ; new ones will never be offered. Let us therefore diligently improve every opportunity of doing good. Perhaps this may be the last of this kind some of us will ever have : And when the dying hour comes, how poor and empty will all the vain expensive amusements of life appear ! How little will they bear reflection ! Whereas acts of benevolence, and a well-conducted charity afford pleasures, which bear the review, and spring up afresh upon reflection. These heighten the enjoyments of life, chear under the evils of it, soften the dying pillow, and scatter the darkness of the grave. When all the glories of this world are fled as a dream, when the earth itself is burnt up, these our works of faith will triumph over this wreck of nature, accompany us to the bar of God, and, through Christ, recommend us to that comfortable Sentence : *Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat ; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink. — Verily, I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto meⁱ.*

ⁱ Matth. xxv. 34, — 40.

